

31 March 1971

Chal:

Per our conversation, attached are the Quan Doi Nhan Dan articles. This batch includes the first six installments. We know there are at least five more (now being translated) and there may be others on top of that. As we discussed, this is the fullest account of the trail and North Vietnamese activities therein ever to appear in the DRV's public media. The word Laos is never mentioned (nor is South Vietnam) but it is patently clear that the people discussed whose heroic activities are glowingly reported are (a) North Vietnamese and (b) patently working outside the DRV's territorial borders. The series is both intriguing and entertaining.

Regards

GAC:mee

Sent PERSONAL to Mr. Chalmers Roberts
The Washington Post
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First Installment

Hanoi QUAN DOI NHAN DAN 3 Mar 71 p 3 S

[Khanh Van report: "We Followed the Convoys to the Front"]

[Text] I have just followed the truck convoys to the battlefield. I have realized that the military transportation combatants operating along this historic road section have courageously overcome countless difficulties and challenges, have fought the enemy in order to move forward, have opened roads to travel, and, day and night, have sought ways to provide the most extensive and most satisfactory support and assistance for the frontline. Their feats of arms are indeed magnificent. The pages of my report only reflect one side and a minor part of the great achievements scored along the entire road section. The deeds performed along this route are as numerous as are the trees in the jungles surrounding the Truong Son Mountain range. Moreover, no sooner had we recorded the stories that happened the previous day than new and immeasurably more marvelous stories emerged.

1--The Earliest Impressions

The sun's rays went through the thin clouds hanging over the Truong Son Mountain range. The sunlight filtered through the high foliage, showered the surface of the road, and caressed the white, slogan-bearing sign boards upon which the brilliance of the afternoon sun seemed to be lingering.

A truck convoy--which the brothers referred to as "wife group 1"--was [as published]--into the offensive departure position. This means that "wife group 2" should be at another milestone along the road. The artillery gun trailers were veering toward the side-paths so that the cargo trucks could fall into formation. The order given by the armed branch [transportation branch] station was that all the artillery gun trailers were to follow "wife group 1."

The armed branch station cadres came to every truck to visit and motivate the driving combatants. Many people were going into and out of the canteens which sold cigarettes, tobacco, and candies. The brothers told me that on certain days, even beef noodles were on sale. Apparently, the combatants in the assault literary and artistic team were working most enthusiastically. A thin brother with a light complexion--who was walking with another brother with a dark complexion--was hastily sticking slogan-bearing banderols on the truck doors. A girl--whose hair fell to her breasts--was standing on the running board of a truck and was singing a song entitled "I Am a Communications and Liaison Girl." An accompanying flute player was sitting on the hood of the truck. The driving combatant was sitting on a front mudguard, one was sitting behind the flute player, a group of four brothers were standing in front of the truck with their hands placed around each other's shoulders, and a number of others were smoking and occasionally whispered into each other's ears something that seemed to arouse their mutual interests. On the left side of the road two groups of brothers were sitting on the trunks of fallen trees.

Suddenly, an assault youth unit, which consisted mostly of girls, passed by in the course of an operation. The girls were carrying heavy packs and, in particular, each carried a small pillow on her back. The blue-and-red trimmings on the pillow could be seen.

The atmosphere became rather animated and the scene became less orderly. Fortunately, the high pitch of the girl performer's song was reverberating. Her melodious tune kept the listeners attentive from the beginning to the end, otherwise the song could have been interrupted by many inquiries about one's friends back home.

- Before the applause was expected uproar started:
- Where did you come from? Anyone from Thanh Hoa?
- There are some coming from Thanh Hoa back there. But whom are you looking for?
- For her:
- Look at that girl. She should be a native of Thai Binh.
- Where are you comrades going?
- We are going to any place where the enemy exists. Do you brothers think that only you are moving toward the front?
- What a girl!
- I am a descendant of Madame Trieu!

People roared with laughter. It is difficult for an outsider to imagine that this was the environment in which the military transportation units were preparing to move along the path that was studded with bombs and bullets.

I was riding in the small car of a comrade cadre from an organ of the command headquarters. Our small car had to stop although it had priority over the other vehicles. The other small car that drove ahead of us broke down. After the first small car's engine trouble had been fixed, the occupants of our small car--to put it frankly--also wanted to enjoy some music. Therefore, when the first small car re-started, the comrade driver of our car did not want to start because the song had not yet been finished, the girl performer was still singing fervently. She was looking at everyone and her lips were set in an ever radiant smile. Then, no sooner had our comrade driver started the engine than members of the assault youth unit blocked the road. Although our comrade driver sounded the horn, they did not budge because they were absorbed in talk about the folks back home.

Despite the fact that our small car had driven to the right and to the left, it still could not get past a cargo truck convoy. I knew that, at that time, each of us had different feelings. The comrade driver was unmistakably impatient. The comrade cadre from the command headquarters was attentively observing the departure formation of the truck convoy and was not fully satisfied with the armed branch station's performance. As for me, I calmly played my role as an observer and silently counted each truck. However, after having counted the 50th truck, I raised my eyes and found that the remaining section of the convoy was still long. I, therefore, became a little impatient.

Before our car could reach the beginning of the truck convoy, the movement order was given. The truck engines roared. Our car had to temporarily cut into the formation of the cargo truck convoy. At that time, the bulldozers along the roadsides also started their engines in preparation for further widening the road.

Following the convoys to the front, I felt impatient. At the outset, I thought that the trucks would run continuously through the jungles and would be shielded by the foliage. However, when the convoy crossed over summit 301, I began to see the bomb craters. The trucks began to run along an open, devastated road section where the smoke emanating from the craters could be smelled everywhere.

The first night, then the second night went by. I gradually realized that almost no part of this road section was well concealed. Wherever I went, I found that the road was so barren that it seemed to be challenging the aggressors. Along the roadsides various kinds of trees--including one kind of tree, the trunk of which had a diameter

Approved For Release 2004/12/02 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000600100002-9

which... While these... the outstretched arms of two or three persons could not surround it--had been stripped of their leaves and branches. There remained only bare trunks with pointed tops. If we contemplated this scene through the early-morning mist, we would have the impression that a flotilla of big sailboats, the masts of which were close to one another, was resting along a river. It was probably for this reason that no truck appeared to be camouflaged. Therefore, when one saw a truck which was decked with green leaves, he could promptly tell that it was a truck that had been newly added to the unit, that its driver also was newly assigned to the unit, or that it was highly likely that the truck did not belong to the military transportation unit.

I was told that on certain days, aggressor aircraft, in three formations, sprayed toxic chemicals over this road. The trees along the roadside had been stripped of their green leaves. I was also told of the days when a fire had been burning continuously. The fire, consuming the dry leaves, burned endlessly for more than 1 month. The fire burned the branches and sometimes a fire-engulfed branch fell down. The fire started by the timed steel-pellet bombs was roaring on the hill slopes. The flames from the plastic substance in the bombs splattered on the surface of the road and even stuck to the rolling tires of the trucks.

Comrade Bang, a driver combatant, also told me that previously on every night for a whole week the trucks had to run through arcs of fire all along the section from milestone 16 to milestone 41, Route A. It was oppressively hot in the driving cabin. The comrade drivers were deeply concerned about the possibility that their gasoline might catch fire.

The road was aglow with the fires started by the bombs. However, I have learned that every evening the atmosphere at the offensive departure position is as animated as it was when I first came there. When evening comes, people see one another off and extend regards and best wishes to one another. At dawn, people at the departing position welcome back those who set out the previous evening, repair their trucks, provide them with food and lodging, and prepare goods so that, when evening comes, they can joyfully see them off. The tasks seem to be routine, but, in fact, through each movement, life becomes more inspiring and the men become considerably more experienced.

Second Installment

Hanoi QUAN DOI NHAN DAN 4 Mar 71 p 3 S

[Text] When we passed key point 907 and arrived at readjustment station N, the engineer soldiers motioned the vehicle to stop. I had hardly understood what happened when a voice came from the mouth of an underground shelter by the side of the road:

"Was Comrade Trong up there? (Trong was a cadre of a command agency) Please go down and talk with people at home."

I was surprised. Why did those people down there know everything even at night? When the vehicle departed again, Comrade Trong told me:

"That's very interesting. People are kept immediately informed of our arriving at each milestone. The same is true with Comrade Tran Hanh who can talk with the air force commander at the airfield from wherever he is in the skies.

On one night, I accompanied a transportation truck convoy. As the day was dawning we arrived at a readjustment station. As I was busy looking around, a man asked:

"Is the comrade correspondent aboard the truck?"

Surprised, I asked:

"What is the matter comrade?"

"Please get down and take a rest at the communications and liaison station. You will resume your trip tomorrow night."

Now I understood that the responsible comrades knew wherever I went. Thus I began enjoying the interesting things told me by Comrade Trong.

2--A Briefing at the Command Post

As I entered the command post, the comrade head of the propaganda and training organ suggested to me:

"It is better for you to attend some briefings at the command post. I think that they will be very profitable for you before you set out for the various trails."

This suggestion prompted me to give up my initial intention of going down at once to the basic units, key points, battlegrounds, and truck convoys to collect documents.

From the propaganda and training organ to the briefing place, I had to climb three hills. It took me 50 minutes to arrive at the place. The briefing place was a tall, big house built against a mountain and surrounded by wide verandas. It looked very spacious. Two hundred-watt electric bulbs shed light on a map 6 meters high outlining the transportation lines, thus making the briefing room brighter and more solemn. On the map, the drawn lines were interlaced vertically and horizontally and connected with each other in red-colored meshes of different sizes--small, big, square, and diamond-shaped--that spread over the map. The comrade head of the propaganda and training organ told me that the present trail is several thousand kilometers long. Truck convoys do not go in only one direction. In each direction there is not just one axis or one form of transportation. Each axis has not only a main trail, but many auxiliary ones. Really, I cannot imagine how such a gigantic project has been achieved since the breakout of the anti-U.S. national salvation war of our people under fierce enemy bombing.

The briefing was started as scheduled. The on-duty cadres of the combat staff, the staff in charge of repairing roads and bridges, and the transportation staff and other signal, communications and liaison, rear supply, and political cadres took turns in explaining each aspect of their work after one day and one night of fighting. To make the briefing clear and concise, a number of comrades brought with them charts showing the latest developments in their branches.

On a large table that filled half of the room was a detailed map under a plastic cover. Around the table sat the command members, the chiefs of staff, and the heads of the political and logistics branches. On the rows of chairs at the other end of the room sat the responsible cadres of various bureaus, the assistants of various branches of the three organs, the combat staff, the transportation staff, and the staff in charge of repairing roads and bridges, and the heads of the political and rear supply organs.

Aircraft roared continuously overhead. Sometimes fragment bombs exploded to the south. Sometimes bombs from B-52's exploded for a while to the north. Occasionally, the house was shaken as if there were an earthquake. I found that these explosions did not affect the briefing. It seemed that everyone was too familiar with these explosions.

The on-duty combat cadre gave a briefing on the enemy situation, ranging from the enemy's tactical tricks to the tonnage of bombs dropped at each milestone, road, or military station. He described fairly clearly a battle fought by the anti-aircraft unit of military station M yesterday, which downed five aircraft and which was encircling the pilots in order to capture them; a battle fought by the infantry troops of military station N, who annihilated a large group of enemy rangers and seized all the weapons and

radio communication sets; and particularly a battle fought by an antiaircraft artillery unit in charge of protecting bunker B, which downed a C-130 aircraft that chased and strafed our vehicles at night. Five pilots were burned to death in that battle.

The details which the on-duty cadre of the road and bridge staff presented were even more complete. He was conversant with everything, from weather conditions to the level of water in the tunnels along the overall route. He held firmly to every detail. For instance, he knew how many bombs were dropped on which key points, how many bombs hit the surface of a road, how many cubic meters of earth and stone were required to repair a damaged road section, how many squads were required to do the repair job, how the command post directed the work, and at what time the repair of this road section was finished. He also knew at which milestone the bulldozer supplied to the La Hoa crossroad and the explosives given to military stations and arrived. He presented all this clearly as if he himself were just back from the scene.

All other on-duty comrades also controlled the situation very firmly and practically. Even the on-duty political comrade reported clearly on which party chapter had to a certain extent disseminated the resolution of the command party chapter and on the new aspects of the emulation movement in this or that military station.

After a signal cadre briefed on the maintenance of signal and liaison operations on a chart showing the entire signal network throughout the trail, I understood that the skillful command was due partly to the signal operations. I could not imagine how the radio communications combatants, after one day and one night, received and dispatched nearly 600 messages, of which only two were not transmitted. Two hundred eightysix cuts in telephone wires were repaired by telephone combatants. The telephone wires were cut by enemy bombing or by falling trees caused by the north-east winds. The comrade head of the propaganda and training told me:

"Without the signal operations, a commander becomes deaf and dumb..."

The on-duty transportation cadre was the last one to give a briefing on the transportation activities. He hardly had any hair left on his head. It seemed that he was prematurely bald. Probably the statistics in the military transportation task had caused him to become prematurely bald. Actually he looked very strong.

According to the head of the propaganda and training organs, the on-duty transportation cadre was kept the busiest from early that evening till the moment he showed a chart full of figures--which he was the only man to understand--and began the briefing. (On later nights while working throughout the night with on-duty cadres, I found out that almost everyone was busy all night long, especially from midnight on.) As the day was dawning, the assistant to the on-duty transportation cadre had to use a calculating machine to work out the many calculations. The on-duty transportation cadre had to lean on the transportation map in the on-duty cadre room, making calculations, recording figures, and erasing what he had written before he obtained the right figures. Early in the morning, he looked self-confident. I understood that information on last night's convoys had been obtained not only from his figures, but also by talking to other men. As a result of working on his figures throughout the night, he stepped out of the on-duty cadre room with a self-confident appearance.

He stood at attention and asked for permission from the commander to give the briefing. Everyone followed him more attentively than ever before. The results obtained by tens of thousands of cadres and fighters after one day and one night of hard, fierce fighting on the trails were now reflected in the figures he presented. At this moment, these figures had a pleasant effect because they fully satisfied the earnest aspirations of our men on the way to the great frontline.

Third Installment

Hanoi QUAN DOI NHAN DAN 5 Mar 71 p 3 S

[Text] Each time he spoke of the arrival at a military station and the tactical formation of vehicles, he looked the comrade commander straight in his attentive eyes, as if he wanted to share his joy with his commander who habitually does things very boldly and recapitulates very quickly on activities which now could be called the military transportation art. Suddenly he spoke loudly:

-Army branch station M has exceeded its daily norm by 143 percent. It was a fine formation!

Everyone in the briefing room was happy. Fine formation! everyone knows that by these two words he meant that the convoys had advanced in tactical formation unharmed: there were no casualties, no damaged vehicles. In particular, the figure 143 percent made everyone very happy. The political commissar had not felt well for several days. The commander had forced him to take a rest, but when it was time for the duty cadre of the transportation staff to make his report, the political commissar came and sat in the adjoining room to listen to the report. At that point, he uttered: "Very good!" He stood up and entered the briefing room; taking a seat near the comrade commander.

The duty cadre of the transportation staff continued to speak loudly and excitedly. First of all, he spoke of the transportation situation at army branch station B. He looked at everyone, his face illuminated with joy and pride:

-At army branch station B, the technical formation was very mobile. There was flexible cooperation between the main and auxiliary roads. Thus, although the enemy blocked the road to Phuong Mai, our convoys continued to advance and strongly develop their offensive power in one night of transportation. Technical coefficient: 94 percent. Use coefficient: 107 percent. At this moment, 208 percent of the daily norm has been achieved. Vehicles are advancing on roads. The report will be resumed at 1000 hours...

At that moment, no one could refrain from showing his joy. Long applause broke out in the briefing room.

The comrade head of the propaganda and training bureau told me that since army branch station B is a distant station, it had encountered many difficulties, but that cadres and combatants there had refused to yield. Almost all vehicles at army branch station B were repair vehicles, yet their technical coefficient was the highest. A high spirit of self-reliance was the sole reason for these results. For instance, in one season some 1,000 springs were broken. Higher echelons supplied only a small number of new springs, yet throughout that season no vehicle stopped functioning because of a shortage of springs.

The commander attentively listened to the report and the figures of achievements, his brilliant eyes reflecting satisfaction. The commander--people told me--was constantly busy drawing up bold projects and improving the military transportation art in order to carry supplies to the frontline. When road 2A was the only passable road, the enemy concentrated his attacks on it. Although working day and night to repair it, the Engineering Corps combatants, however, were unable to make it passable. The 6th Engineering Company had to send its men to carry gasoline so the vehicles at the other end of the keypoint could transport supplies onward. Some combatants were killed while transporting gasoline tins on their shoulders. The commander came to the spot and, along with the political commissar of the army branch station, studied the situation.

They decided to open road 2C right away. While vehicles were running uninterrupted on road 2C he ordered the opening of road 2D. He told the cadres in that area: "In one direction, there must be many spearheads of attacks. It is necessary to force the enemy to disperse his attacks not only along the full length of a road, but also laterally against the auxiliary roads. It is necessary to force the enemy to choose another objective although the present one has not been attained." The enemy learned of the existence of road 2C only weeks after it was made passable. He attacked road 2C. Our vehicles used road 2D and the repaired road 2A. The enemy was confused... but when our vehicles ran also on road 2D, the enemy stopped his attacks for a week, not knowing which roads to attack, or how to attack them. He was at a loss. Since then, many new roads were opened, thus enabling the military transportation branch to firmly develop its offensive position for a long period of time.

The commander spoke. He reminded on-duty cadres of the necessity of quickly carrying out this campaign and supervising the activities of the various army branch stations. He urged the comrade staff assistants to emulate among themselves in sending congratulatory messages to detachments that had downed C-130 planes. He excitedly spoke of army branch station B:

-This is an almost impossible mission. How, with a fixed number of vehicles and a fixed itinerary, dare they decide to make in one night a total number of trips bigger than the total number of available vehicles to deliver supplies to the frontline? Cadres and combatants there refuse to let themselves be bound by bureaucratic methods. Their combat comportment does not follow any regulations. Their own regulations are thoroughly revolutionary.

Such briefings became a routine, regular, and never-forgotten task, no matter whether enemy bombs might explode in the command post area.

During a few days there, I had the opportunity to roughly understand the command organization on this military transportation trail. I was told by the commander that every day, in each road section, there were several hundred problems that needed to be solved by cadres. The commander of an armed branch station must possess all-round abilities so that he can command an armed branch that works in close coordination with other armed branches. Ten years ago, he was a commander of a Xe Tho [draft animal or human transport] transportation battalion. He is now qualified to become a commander of a Xe Tho transportation regiment, but he cannot be a commander of an armed branch station. An armed branch station is no longer viewed as a station in charge of delivering goods to troops, but as a joint military transportation and armed branch station command organ in the anti-U.S. national salvation war. The general characteristics of the enemy situation and of the terrain and weather conditions on a trail along which soldiers have to fight to insure transportation not only require that a commander know how vehicles are operating, what tactics an antiaircraft artillery unit has adopted in fighting the enemy, which mountain slope needs to be leveled, and which muddy road section needs to be consolidated, but also that he acquire adequate knowledge to enable him to be a chief of staff of bridges and roads, a combat chief of staff, and a planner at the same time. The commander smiled and told me intimately:

-"Therefore, if you want to report on military transportation, it is not enough to accompany the driver combatants, even though military transportation is a central force of all other armed branches combined. You should make stopovers at some key points to seek to understand how the artillery and engineer troops fight to support convoys in carrying out their missions. You should ponder a lot when you learn that in a month the U.S. aggressors' aircraft make as many as 16,871 sorties to drop bombs on key points. This does not include the bombing by B-52's which make more than 700 sorties a month. These aircraft take off from 7 bases in Thailand, from 2 aircraft carriers in the Pacific Ocean, and from the bases of Da Nang, Chu Lai, Phu Bai... even from Okinawa, Japan, B-52's have bombed this trail almost constantly. Later, you will see that transportation operations do not stop any night."

3--Offensive Formations

I stayed for a period with a vehicle battalion and continued to accompany vehicles farther. According to plan, I would stop at a key point.

That night was a beautiful moonlit night. The tender moonlight spread away. The convoy sped down the trail. Armed branch station head N was aboard a small vehicle leading the convoy. It was followed close behind by other vehicles, which, wanting to pass, honked their horns. He left the small vehicle and boarded the leading truck. The small vehicle was left behind at the side of the road. The whole trail was passable, although at 1500 hours the enemy had dropped more than 300 magnetic and time bombs on these two key points: the intersection LB and the covered point 106. All the artillery emplacements were at the first echelon alert position before the vehicles started their trip.

Battalion leader Quang was in the 38th truck, in the middle of the convoy formation. As observed by many brothers, Quang was a little thin and paler at that time. His character was dynamic and his talk was very charming. However, during these years, he has become sometimes meditative and taciturn. Perhaps he cannot forget the day when U.S. aircraft dropped pellet bombs on his native village of Hoanh Son where his younger sister was killed, his mother was wounded, and his home was destroyed. After that day, his younger brother Tran Ngoc Lien joined the army and is now fighting at the place to which his battalion is moving.

Quang told me that he had entered the driving school on the day when the Dien Bien [Phu] military campaign was launched. He was ordered to go to this school when he was a liaison agent of an army unit fighting at Muong Thanh. Since then, he has overcome numerous hardships and difficulties but never before had he engaged in such difficult and hard work as now and never had he felt so mature and so proud of his military transport task as now. It is very interesting for him to think about the fact that since the Dien Bien Phu victory our armed forces prepared their strength for battles more than 10 years later in order to complete the country's revolutionary undertaking in which he is participating.

Fourth Installment

Hanoi QUAN DOI NHAN DAN 7 Mar 71 p 3 S

[Text] The convoy continued to hurriedly move past milestone 63. Suddenly, the wind swirled overhead. Antiaircraft fire and the explosion of steel-pellet bombs thundered amid the truck formation. At that time, the vehicle carrying the head of armed branch station N arrived at a readjustment station. He asked the two engineer combatants who were standing at the entrance to a shelter:

--Where were the steel-pellet bombs dropped, mister? What is the status of the road? (He usually uses the word "mister" in addressing any man.)

The engineer combatants--who were aware that the head of the armed branch station was leading the truck formation that night--promptly and precisely reported:

--Steel-pellet bombs were dropped back there, approximately at milestone 63. The road section ahead remains open.

--Very good: Cigarettes? (He handed the cigarettes to the engineer combatants.)

--Very good. We ran out of tobacco this afternoon.

--Comrades, tell all the brother drivers to firmly maintain the speed of the convoy. Favorable opportunities prevail.

At milestone 63, a truck stopped abruptly. Ahead of it was a column of black smoke that engulfed the surface of the road. The trucks in the rear halted, bumper-to-bumper. Battalion commander Quang--who was then riding in one of the vehicles in the rear--stepped out of his vehicle and ran toward one truck near the smoke column. Dust and smoke were lingering on the surface of the road. The battalion commander ran through the smoke, but he did not find the preceding truck: He went back and asked:

--Why did you stop, buddy?

--The thick dust had reduced the visibility to zero.

Battalion commander Quang, standing on the running board of the truck, said loudly:

--Comrades, may I have your attention, please: Firmly maintain the same speed and move forward! Move on, buddy! I'll be standing on this running board for a while.

The trucks again roared ahead. At milestone 64 Quang stepped down, entered a communications shelter, and telephoned a control point in order to keep himself informed of the status of the preceding trucks. The control point told him that a total of 44 trucks had been handed over. Quang hurriedly emerged from the shelter. Standing on the roadside, he encouraged the driver of every truck that stopped in front of the communications shelter.

--Is that you, Vuong? Speed up!

--Is that you, Thi? Firmly maintain the formation and insure that the trucks are not running too far from each other....

The vehicle that had carried Quang arrived. He could immediately recognize it through its special features: its front part and front mudguards had not been damaged.

A moment later, enemy aircraft zoomed over the truck formation. The antiaircraft fire formed an interwoven net which, viewed from the driver's cabin, looked like red barriers cutting into the windshield. Violent bomb explosions sent dirt showering onto the tops of the drivers' cabins. No sooner had Quang's vehicle turned around a curve than it was engulfed in a thick column of smoke and dust. The comrade driver of his vehicle leaned forward in order to take a close look and, slowing down, said:

--I can't see the surface of the road any more. Quang said:

--Buddy, keep sight of the two lines of bare trees along the roadsides and move between them.

From the gradually dissolving smoke column, a voice was heard saying:

--The road is not damaged. Defoliating bombs were dropped on the hills!

The trucks continued to move along. Somewhere in the vicinity of the road, someone was playing a flute. The musical piece was entitled, "You Still Are Engaged in an Operation." The sound of the flute was so nice that the rumbling sound of the trucks could not drown it out. Upon arrival at our destination, Quang told me that the circumstances that prevailed on that day reminded him of an event that occurred last year. Quang said that while his battalion was making a 90-degree turn the enemy dropped about one dozen flares overhead. The whole convoy was exposed atop a hill

but it continued to move forward and, better still, moved even faster by taking advantage of the illumination provided by the flares. Occasionally, the convoy stopped for a few minutes--so the engineer unit could probe the road ahead--and then continued to move on. Quang said: "Once the truck formation has entered a strategic zone, it cannot stop, but, rather, must move rapidly, no matter how intensive the enemy's raids may be. Our vehicles are like the infantrymen who, once the path of advance has been cleared, must rapidly unleash deep thrusts and must split up the enemy's ranks in order to annihilate him."

When the convoy was nearing three-way intersection 82, the enemy attacked tunnel 86. Antiaircraft fire burst intermittently. The vehicle carrying armed branch chief N stopped at intersection 82. The comrade commander of the engineer company there let it be known that as a result of effective antiaircraft fire, all enemy bombs were dropped in the jungle, and tunnel 86 remained open. However, there was the possibility that the enemy might shift his strikes toward key point V M. When he arrived at four-way intersection 6 and 4, armed branch station chief N got out of his car to attempt to obtain additional information about the situation. He found out that the enemy had just struck control point V M area and cut both the main and supplementary road sections.

At their afternoon briefing--which was held to assert the determination to carry out the transportation plan at night--members of the three staff organs, after studying the fact that the enemy had carried out reconnaissance activities eight times over the V M area, also anticipated enemy strikes at that control point. The important requirement was to grasp the concrete situation. In a call from the foot of the control point, the engineer battalion commander reported that it would take 26 minutes to reopen the road section running over hill 12 and that it would take 1 hour and 20 minutes to reopen road section 28.

According to the movement plan for that night, the truck formation's offensive line passed through the key point along road section 28. In view of the existing situation, if the truck formation moved along the pre-established itinerary--that is, along road section 28--it would certainly have had to wait for 1 hour. In that case, a favorable opportunity would have been lost. On the other hand, it was reported that it would take 26 minutes to reopen the road section that ran over slope 12. Therefore, if the trucks restarted immediately, they would arrive at the foot of the slope exactly at the time when the road section was reopened. In that case, the trucks would not have had to wait, the main offensive itinerary would not have been obstructed, and it would have been absolutely possible to insure that the truck movement would continue uninterrupted in the right direction.

Armed branch station chief N pondered the alternatives very rapidly, then radioed the command post and presented his plan, with which the command promptly concurred. He immediately radioed engineer battalion commander Ying:

--I have decided to shift the itinerary of the truck formation toward hill 12. You should insure that this road section is reopened within the next 26 minutes. Don't let a situation arise where the truck formation that is moving out encounters the truck formation that is moving in. My goodness! We are going to use many tactics tonight, mister. I am leaving now.

The vehicle carrying armed branch station chief N reached the foot of hill 12 within 24 minutes. The traffic-regulating combatant said decisively:

--Stop!

Before armed branch station chief N had time to inquire about the status of the road, a shot resounded from the summit of the hill, signaling that the road has been

reopened. In his career as commander of a military transportation unit, this was one of the few occasions when armed branch station chief N became very excited. He asked an engineer combatant:

--Where is the comrade battalion commander, buddy?

--He is up there, sir, at the countersabotage place.

Impatient, the brother driving combatant said:

--The road has been reopened. Why don't you let us move along?

--Just a moment.

--What are you going to do? Send someone to the top of the hill to check?

--Definitely not.

The engineer combatant hastily rushed toward the lead truck and posted two slogan-bearing banderols on both of its doors.

The armed branch station chief joyfully asked:

--Are you motivating our brothers, sister? What do the slogans say? It's dark. You should read them so that the brothers can know what they say.

--One slogan says: "The road has been cleared; the trucks are moving smoothly through the control point." The other slogan says: "The driving and engineer combatants are, day and night, close together, as are a picture and its shadow."

--That's good. However, you should only stick banderols on this truck, otherwise it would be time-consuming and, as a result, our opportunities would be wasted. Goodbye now!

The trucks rolled over slope 12, stirring up clouds of dust which shrouded everyone at both ends of the key point. In the moonlight, the swirling dust looked like steaming vapor rising from a big river.

During the old period of the three kingdoms (tam quoc) in China, one could guess the strength of the enemy forces by looking at the innumerable swords, spears, and flags that appeared in the distance, or by looking at the soaring thick clouds of dust that were stirred by the galloping bands of warrior horses.

That night along this route leading to the front, our convoy also stirred the thick clouds of dust that beclouded the jungle. The U.S. aggressors were aware of that, but were unable to do anything about it.

4--At A Key Point

I parted from Van and Tho, the number one and number two driving combatants of the 101st Vehicle Battalion--a heroic unit--and stopped over at a control point west of the La Hoa three-way intersection.

The engineer combatant who came to meet me had a familiar voice. I later found out that he was a native of Tan Phong, Thai Binh Province. His name was Cu. He was only 23-years old. Cu led me to a solid shelter. He said:

--Your vehicle must have rocked violently along the bad road. You must be very tired. You should take a nap. At dawn I will take you to the house so that you can rest.

I said to myself: I am not coming here to sleep!

I told Cu:

--Comrade, if you are not busy, let us sit down and talk.

--No. I must go to the combat-duty shelter.

--Let me accompany you.

--No, you can't, that shelter is full. Moreover, I have been asked by the company to carefully take you down to the shelter. This area where we are standing was bombed 3 days ago by B-52's. The fire ignited by the bombs is still burning. Two bombs exploded just behind this shelter. At daybreak you will see that no green leaves survive. Early this evening, the enemy again dropped steel-pellet bombs on a place 100 meters from this shelter.

--Was anyone hurt?

--No, all the bombs fell on the hills. At about midnight the enemy dropped bombs in front of this shelter. Fortunately, all the bombs fell into the ravine. Did you see the fire that was burning in the ravine? A foul odor filled this place. Well, I have to go now. Lay down and rest.

No sooner had Cu departed than I moved out of the shelter, carrying my pack with me. I wanted to stay awake and it was not exciting to stay in the shelter. Even in the dark night, the control point was like a thrilling film. [end of fourth installment]

HANOI CORRESPONDENT DESCRIBES CONDITIONS ON HO CHI MINH TRAIL

Hanoi QUAN DOI NHAN DAN 8 Mar 71 p 3 S

[Fifth installment of correspondent Khanh Van's report on Ho Chi Minh Trail activities]

[Text] The heavily foggy skies reduced the intensity of moonlight. Now that I looked around the key point, I felt that it was desolate, boundless, and wide open. The voice of a comrade who phoned from an upper trench sounded like a warm echo resounding from afar. Vehicles were going to move out. 51 vehicles! Oh! This unit had its vehicles turned around so as to have them ready to move out tomorrow night. I listened to all this and was interested. On the side of a mountain, a smoldering fire intermittently flared up like fireworks. Far away, an arc-shaped stretch of fire seemed to burn along the side of a hill. According to the above-mentioned comrade driver, the compatriots burned their gardens and turned them into ricefields. Around me, all things were scattered in disorder, and I could distinguish nothing. A mass of white and black shiny machinery littered one side of the route and looked like a wrecked enemy plane such as I had seen elsewhere. Three or four fins of the tail of a magnetic bomb stretched, oblique or perpendicular; an unusable truck tire which was partially cut for making sandals, dimly looked like a reel of electric wire; on my left shells of steel-pellet bombs were placed parallel like two rows of chairs, in the middle of which was placed a long wooden trunk of the size of the 37 millimeter antiaircraft ammunition container, on which our troops were likely to sit to smoke cigarettes and to chat, were they not? On the other side of the route, there were shiny objects. Curiously I examined them. They were 37-millimeter ammunition shells. This place might have been used as a battleground, several days ago...

It was a little cold, quiet, and lonely. Nothing was heard, except for telephone dialings, people's bass voices resounding in trenches from afar, winds blowing feebly through iron poles that were scattered in disorder, and landslides on hills.

I returned to my trench, by the door of which I spread a piece of nylon, sat on it, and leaned on my rucksack to rest. Moments later, the roaring of trucks moving out was pleasant to the ears. One truck, two trucks, three trucks, four trucks... because it was so dusty, I had to stand up. I seemed to hear Cu's voice. He, at the door of a forward trench, asked the truck unit to give its serial number. The trucks stopped for a while and hurriedly proceeded forward. Other trucks slowly passed by the door of the alert combat trench, and the drivers concisely said "two zero one" or "one zero one" and moved speedily forward.

No sooner had I counted the 27th truck than I heard the roaring of helicopters and then jet planes. I intended to go into my trench, but I did not do this, because I heard and saw trucks cross over the hill with a muffled roaring. The helicopter circled the key point. Two jet planes made larger circles at higher altitudes. Trucks continued to pass by the door of the alert combat trench. Questions and answers about the serial numbers of units continued to be heard.

--Pay attention to your light system. B-26K is circling overhead, Cu told a driver combatant.

--They do their work, we do ours, the driver combatant answered.

Suddenly, thunderous blasts were heard from the rear. Did they start firing? I intended to run into my trench, but no sooner did I turn around than I saw anti-aircraft shells move toward the B-26K plane. Thunderous blasts were heard from my left. Those firings went higher than the others. The control point definitely lost its quiet atmosphere. Another cluster of rounds was in front of me. It was approximately 50 meters away and its blasts beat against my ears. A truck thunderously moved by, leaving behind clouds of dust. Another truck moved forward with a muffled roaring. Cu asked the truck driver to give the serial number of his unit and the driver combatant answered. I thought of myths and imagined that I was sitting on a huge steel horse that had stood quiet and that suddenly reared and shot out fire. I forgot the B-26K plane's roar that had gradually diminished in intensity.

It was hot. The skies were blue and vast. Together with company commander Son, I went to the control point and the Dat Do and Tay Ao turns. We moved southward, met and talked for a while with the engineer combatants stationed there and then proceeded toward a reconnaissance squad. Exactly as Cu had said, around the control point there was no longer a green leaf or an undamaged tree trunk. Cu recalled that at the beginning of the opening of the route, the jungle was so dense that only immense green vegetation could be seen from the observation tower. I have now seen that all hills and mountains look like immense brown shoals and that everything is brown, from high mountain crests to the bottom of valleys. On hills and at the bottom of the valleys, we have only seen the remains of bombs, "tropical trees" (sensors dropped by the enemy) and shells of steel-pellet bombs that look like junk from the distance. Pink cases of enemy signal flares, which littered the roadway, were completely flattened because they were run over and over by trucks. Resin from bombs was spread over the roadway. The burned resin was as black as buffalo excrement and the unburned resin looked like dried frog saliva. Along both sides of the road, were several "pink ear" mines and "liver" mines which were sometimes called grain mines. The comrade company commander handed a "pink ear" mine to me. It looked like a "pink ear" screw on a bicycle.

A gust of wind blew. Dust flew like smoke over the hills. I noticed that the earth on the key point was pulverized and looked like fine flour. I intended to ascend the crest of a hill to take pictures, but I failed because my feet got stuck in the powdered earth. I turned around and the dirt went into my shoes. Cu told me that with a heavy downpour this powdered earth would become mud. It would spread over the roadway and reach such a height that it would dirty us even if we wore boots. Cu also said that at T B the earth was so powder-like that the brothers there could not dig trenches and had to imbed the barrels into the soil to emplace them in the powdered earth in order to put shells of steel-pellet bombs atop the barrels to use them as shelters.

I asked Cu about the quantity of bombs dropped on each meter of road. After a moment, he said:

"It is impossible to answer, but the condition of the soil reveals how many bombs must have landed. When we first arrived, mango trees blossomed in January and February and chestnut trees blossomed early in the rainy season. How fragrant it was! Today nothing remains, nothing other than the strong odor of the overturned soil..."

Cu continued:

"Did you notice a very strange phenomenon here?"

IV. 19 Mar 71

K 5

NORTH VIETNAM

"Yes, I did!..." I told him all that I observed.

"This is true indeed! But there is another phenomenon." (after a pause, he continued)
"I have tried to listen, but have not heard the sound of crickets at the control point. They must have all died."

Truly, I did not think things could have happened in this way. Cu took a small notebook from the upper pocket of his jacket, looked for a page, and then said:

"A comrade writer or poet who passed by here described the control point in this way: 'At the summit of the mountain that was leveled down, the green has disappeared, nothing has remained to make a shelter, no tree for birds nor flower for bees, even your sandals have to be exposed to the sunshine. Only man can stand firm at the summit. This is the checkpoint!' What is your opinion?"

"That's the way poets express themselves," I replied, suggesting that Cu tell me about a battle he remembered the most.

Comrades in the company command had told me about Cu. Working for many years along communications lines he has served as an engineering member, as a medivac member, as an antiaircraft gunner who downed an AD-6 right over the control point, and now as an engineer reconnaissance member. Cu did all types of work and he did not shirk any. This year, he has been elected a determined-to-win combatant. Cu slowly said:

"We have fought many battles, but I cannot remember them well. Since I do not have the habit of narrating battles, I can only do it poorly."

"Do what you can about what you remember best," I told Cu. So I will now relate what I remember best about him. [end of fifth installment]

IV. 22 Mar 71

K 6

NORTH VIETNAM

HANOI CORRESPONDENT DESCRIBES CONDITIONS ON HO CHI MINH TRAIL

Hanoi QUAN DOI NHAN DAN 9 Mar 71 p 3 S

[Sixth installment of Khanh Van reportage on Ho Chi Minh Trail]

[Text] 5--A Story Recorded at the Control Point

Cu gave the following account:

In the shelter, Hien and I received from the observation post and the company command post a radio message saying that the enemy had dropped bombs of different types on the general area around the Dat Do and Tay Ao turns and in the area where the "steel" squad of combatant Tao was stationed. Besides dropping 24 demolition bombs, 96 magnetic bombs, and 34 time bombs, the enemy also scattered "trigger" mines throughout the area from the position of Toa's squad to the Tay Ao turn.

There is an enemy trick to use bombs of many different types to drop against a key point. According to enemy calculations, if we want to fill in the bomb craters we must first of all destroy enemy time bombs. If we want to destroy the time bombs we must destroy the magnetic bombs first in order to clear the way to move forward. Sometimes, some magnetic bombs are found among the time bombs. Sometimes, the enemy fits tails of magnetic bombs to the time bombs in order to deceive us.

To move forward to destroy the magnetic and time bombs, it is necessary to sweep away the barrier formed by the "trigger" mines that the enemy drops on both ends of the control point in order to keep our troops from moving up to repair the damaged road sections.

The U.S. aggressors thought that it would be after midnight when we, to the best of our ability, succeeded in filling the time bomb craters, and that by that time, the road would be regarded as blocked.

That was the enemy's insidious intent. However, whether or not he could realize his intent depended on us. No sooner had the enemy aircraft flown away than Hien and I immediately set out on a reconnaissance mission. At that time, the control point still was covered by bomb smoke. The roots of dead trees began to catch fire. Sporadic fires broke out everywhere. As soon as we had passed the Dat Do turn, I immediately saw new magnetic bomb tails. Five magnetic bombs were lying on the road, two were negative and one was positive. I told Hien:

--The aggressor pilot that dropped bombs today is not as bad as the pilot that dropped bombs yesterday. Only one out of 100 bombs dropped by the latter hit the target.

--The aggressor pilot that dropped bombs today also had to dump a substantial part of his bomb load into the ravine. Look! Over there, too! It's like poison mushrooms being drenched by persistent rain. Besides, one F-4 was downed. The anti-aircraft unit did a good job!

We were standing near the bombs that the brothers usually call the "highly sensitive firepower" of the enemy. When a vehicle or a person carrying metallic substances passes by these bombs, they immediately explode. Therefore, despite the fact that we had been accustomed to destroying magnetic bombs, we had to be very prudent. Hien volunteered to move forward to destroy the first bomb. I should add that Hien and I belonged to the same reconnaissance squad. Our mutual love and esteem were as profound as the mutual love and esteem among kith-and-kin brothers living in the same home. We always stood together. During this season, we had destroyed a total of 99 magnetic bombs.

Hien moved forward first. After destroying the first bomb, he laughingly said:

--This is the 100th bomb we have destroyed. Today, even if I fell I would not regret it.

We took turns in moving forward to destroy the bombs. While the dark bomb smoke still was lingering on the surface of the road, Hien rushed forward to destroy the fourth bomb. While he was bending to put down the equipment, the bomb exploded, destroying itself. At that moment, I had the feeling that a tree was falling on my back, knocking me down, and squeezing me so that I could not breathe. My saliva became a little salty. As I gradually regained consciousness, I realized that blood was running on my lips and that stones and earth ejected by the bomb explosion completely covered my body. I tried to shake my shoulders in order to shake the stones and earth off my body. After standing up I called out to Hien:

--Hien! Hien! Hien!

I had the feeling that something unfortunate had happened. I staggered toward the place where Hien was standing. I looked around. There was only a deep bomb crater.

--Hien! I called with a low voice.

The area around the bomb crater was littered with small pieces of cloth--each piece was about two or three centimeters long. I picked them up. It was the cloth of Hien's shirt:

--Hien! I mumbled.

I suddenly recalled all the days when we lived together; the times when Hien rushed forward to extinguish the fire in order to save the trucks, or to extinguish the signal flares in order to keep secret the convoy's movement through the control points; and the times when Hien, through painstaking studies, succeeded in detecting a new type of bomb used by the enemy and creatively devised methods of rapidly destroying the enemy's "trigger" bombs. At that time, I felt even more firmly attached to the control point where Hien had fallen. His blood soaked the earth of the road where I was standing.

The magnetic bombs were still lying on the surface of the road. They looked blood-stained. I quietly continued to move forward to destroy the bombs, saying to myself that Hien was still living, that he was joining me in destroying the bombs, and that I had to remain alert. My shirt became soaked with sweat without my knowing it. Another bomb exploded in the distance. Smoke completely engulfed me. My eyes were very sore.

After destroying all the bombs I went to a telephone booth to report on the number of bombs destroyed. However, no sooner had I passed the Dat Do curve than enemy aircraft reappeared and dropped bombs on the road section near the Dat Do and Tay Ao turns. Again, magnetic bombs--their tails extended to slow down their descent--were plunging to the ground, emitting a buzzing sound like that of heavy rain.

I observed the scene. All the bombs--about 30 of them--fell into the ravine. Because of our intense antiaircraft fire, the aggressor pilots recklessly dropped their bomb loads and fled.

No sooner had I passed the Dat Do turn than the enemy aircraft reappeared, zooming over the control point. No sooner had I leaned against the side of the hill than I heard the sound of "trigger" mines landing on the high-level ground over my head. The mother bomb exploded, sending smaller mines showering to the ground, like swarms of flies. The mines were falling down on the Dat Do turn. Some of them exploded when hitting stone.

I picked up my equipment, intending to move forward to sweep away the "trigger" mines. At that moment, a voice was heard calling down from the top of the slope:

--Is that you, Cu? Who else is down there?

I realized that deputy company commander Dung was deploying more people to the scene. I answered:

--Hien and I!

That answer had naturally come to my mind. I thought Hien was alive. He has never died and will never die in my heart.

The deputy commander moved down from the top of the slope. He could not recognize me. From a distance he could have recognized me from my appearance, but when he approached me, my face looked completely different. The comrade deputy company commander said:

--You look like someone who has just come out of a coal pit. Well, go back and rest, we will take over.

I insistently told him:

--I won't rest until the road has been reopened.

We continued to destroy the "trigger" bombs. Together with the detachment that had just come, we blew up dynamite to fill the bomb craters. When I reached the Tay Ao turn, I met Toa's "steel" squad, which also had been dynamiting to fill the bomb craters along the opposite section of the road.

That night, the convoy passed through the control point without waiting even a minute.

6--The Thoughts That Had Sprung Up in My Mind During My Trip

I recorded the above story--which, in fact, cannot yet be concluded--about the engineer combatants at the strategic point where I stayed for a few days. I realized that I could neither fully describe the tremendous proportions of the entire road, nor fully assess the vital role played by each combatant that has maintained a firm foothold on the road throughout the dry and rainy seasons, year after year. As I continue to follow the convoys moving farther and as I stopped over at many other vital points, I realized more clearly the very great road-opening and road-maintaining capabilities of the combatants there. Any time the trucks stopped I heard the sound of enemy aircraft. Bombs and shells exploded almost continuously. The enemy carried out bombings all day long--in the morning, in the afternoon, and at night--and in all forms. Sometimes, F-4's dropped bombs. Sometimes, F-105's swooped down and dropped bombs. Sometimes, B-52's carried out blanket bombings. Every day, bombs exploded everywhere--in the front, in the rear, on the left, and on the right. Every day I was deeply concerned and wondered whether or not the road could be kept open at night. However, from the

various intersections of the road came the radio messages and from the strategic points came the reports saying: "The road remains open." Each night when I followed a convoy I could cover an entire section of the road.

Countless other unexpected situations arose along the road, where, at the outset, we thought we would have had to make a detour and take another road, or to find places where we could hide the trucks. However, the reaction to these unusual situations was so skillful that I never felt troubled. Strangely, I often forgot the fact that I was in the middle of an area studded with bombs and shells.

One night, while the convoy was passing milestone 92 along a horizontal section of the road, a bomb exploded on a hill slope, knocking down a big tree which fell across the road in front of the 29th vehicle, in which I was riding. Comrade Dau, driver of the vehicle, abruptly stepped on the brakes. I was jolted. The vehicle stopped close to the trunk of the fallen tree. The truck formation was cut in two.

The comrade battalion commander, who was riding in another vehicle in the rear, moved forward to study the situation. He ordered that a shot be fired to signal that the road was blocked and, at the same time, ordered all the driving combatants to take out their machetes, hoes, and shovels and to seek ways to eliminate the obstacle. In a moment, a cell consisting of two engineer combatants appeared. One comrade--who appeared to be the cell leader--requested that the trucks pull back so that an explosive charge could be exploded to eject the fallen tree into the ravine.

I observed the way the brothers planted the explosive charge. After it had been planted, we ran together to a shelter. After the explosive charge had exploded, we rushed out again. The big trunk of the fallen tree had already been blown away. The place was littered with branches and leaves. Together we removed them to the edge of the ravine.

The comrade battalion commander highly praised the engineer combatants. We were in a great hurry. I only had enough time to find out that the two engineer combatants were named Vien and Re--both of whom had been there for 3 years. The trucks immediately restarted. We had stopped for only 27 minutes. [end of sixth installment]